

This One's Special....

Written by Mike Kelly
Saturday, 10 May 2014 12:54

Just ask Watauga High baseball coach Pete Hardee and the rest of the Pioneers. Following an inconsistent regular-season, the Pioneers (13-13) were hardly considered a serious threat to win the Northwestern 3A-4A Conference Tournament championship.

But, as New York Yankees great Yogi Berra once said, "it ain't over, 'til it's over." Well, that was certainly the case Friday night. The Pioneers, a No.6 seed, marched their way through the top three teams in the conference to win their fourth conference title in school history, and their second championship in the last four years.

And the last two have come against one of their biggest rivals, South Caldwell.

"They're a quality program," said WHS coach Pete Hardee, who is 270-193-1 during his coaching tenure with the Pioneers. "Every time we play them, our games are real intense. We have a lot of respect for each other. And we both have a strong baseball tradition."

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The Pioneers, since Hardee took over in 1996, have won seven regular-season titles and four tournament championships. The Spartans have won 23 regular-season conference championships in their 37-year history. And, despite Friday night's loss, the Spartans (21-5) have captured eight of the last ten tournament titles.

"We've talked about the history of our program with our players," South Caldwell coach Jeff Parham said. "We educate them on what it means to put on a uniform in this program. It's a matter of pride; it's a matter of being successful every season. It's looking back when its all over and knowing you played on one of those championship teams."

"Our players are aware of what our past teams have accomplished here," Hardee said. "They know what it means to play at (MS) Deal (Stadium) every year. It's not a successful season, if we don't get to Deal. Winning a championship is so special, especially with this group. We got the matchups we needed to win this thing. And we got it done."

The Pioneers, a No.6 seed, are also the lowest seed to win this tournament since 2002. Alexander Central won the tournament (the Cougars beat WHS, a No.7 seed that season, in the finals) as a No.5 seed.

"The conference tournament is a second chance for a team like us that struggled during the

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regular season," Hardee said. "It gave us a chance to redeem ourselves. It was a tough year, that's for sure. This team had me scratching my head more than a few times. And it had our players were wondering, too. They knew they could play better. I knew they could play better. It finally all came together for us in this tournament."

And how rewarding it was for a team that had its problems defensively all season. The Pioneers made 54 errors this year (that's an average of 2.1 errors a game), but they only made three errors in the conference tournament.

"And those were all on me," said junior Utah Jones, who was WHS' starting third baseman in the last three games. "It's a tough position to play compared to shortstop or second base. The ball gets there real quick. I did my best to block the ball, but the one that went through my legs (against Fred T. Foard in the semifinals) was inexcusable. But we're not hanging our heads. We're playing aggressive baseball, and we're hot right now."

And two of WHS' biggest bright spots this season have been its outfield defense and its pitching staff. The outfield led by Jesse Illich, Colby Illich, Matt Tyndall and Hunter Isaacs has made one error all year; the pitching staff, thanks to a stellar effort in the conference tournament, has lowered its team's earned-run-average to 3.35.

And the Pioneers, who got three solid performances on the mound from Hunter Isaacs, Jeffrey Gainey and Jones, gave up six earned runs in 21 innings of work (for a 2.00 ERA) to nail down

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the tournament championship.

And after they coughed up three runs in the first inning Tuesday night against Patton, the Pioneers tossed 16 consecutive scoreless innings before the Spartans stopped the run with three runs in the second inning of Friday night's championship game. As a matter of fact, the Pioneers have given up (beginning with the second inning of Tuesday night's game against the Panthers) just three runs on 15 hits in the last 20 innings for a microscopic 1.05 team ERA.

"Our pitching has been solid all year," Hardee said. "Those guys, for the most part, have been solid on the mound. And we're pretty deep on the mound. Hunter was superb Tuesday night. He came in and shut (Patton) down, and he kept us close. Gainey had a great outing against Foard, and Utah was tough against South. We threw strikes, we made plays defensively, and we got some clutch hitting in this tournament. And that's what you have to do, if want to keep playing this late in the season."

The Pioneers were 6-11 with two outs and runners in scoring position (a .546 batting average). The Pioneers scored ten runs during that stretch. They had three of those hits in Friday's championship game and drove in three runs against the Spartans.

"We've got to keep this going," Jones said. "We have a lot of momentum right now. The state playoffs are coming up (next Tuesday or Wednesday) we're on a run. I just hit my spots tonight. My curve ball was really working. I had problems with it (against Patton), so I worked on it the

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next day in bullpens. I must have thrown about 25 curve balls that day. And Stedman (Sauls, who was named the tournament's Most Valuable Player) was great behind the plate. He called a great game, and my defense made the plays behind me."

"It's fun, especially the mental aspect of the game," Sauls said. "When I call pitches and it works, it makes our pitching staff stronger, and it make our team stronger. I'm aware of the great catchers we've had in this program, and I'm proud that I can be a part of that group. I love playing here, and it's Watauga baseball."

And it's something we can all be proud of.

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